

LAMPMAN AND LECONTE DE
LISLE
S. C. Swift

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Lampman and Leconte de Lisle

By S. C. Swift

AS time goes on and our appreciation of what constitutes the true worth of poetry grows clearer, it will become increasingly evident that Archibald Lampman is, by right of the distinctly individual nature of his work, the greatest English-speaking poet which Canada has thus far produced.

By *individual* I do not mean that Lampman expresses his own ego in any obtrusive fashion: quite the contrary. He brings himself directly into his field of vision to a less extent than most others. But he has a distinctive character both of presentation and style, which is his exclusive province among his fellow verse makers. His pictures are as clear-cut as steel engravings; his vocabulary is as carefully chosen as the gems of a costly necklace. Restraint, simplicity, and a high degree of impersonality are the chief features of his style and content.

The quality of Lampman's work is much more nearly classical—in the humanities sense of the term—than is the case with any other Canadian poet, with perhaps the exception of Dr. Charles G. D. Roberts in his earlier periods. This is seen in his conciseness, his careful choice of modifiers, the general high level of his thought; but it cannot be said that his classical studies offered him any large body of actual subjects for poetic treatment.

As I have already said, Lampman has been in the forefront of Canadian writers who are most largely independent in subject matter and expression. And yet it is evident that Lampman, like every other human being of intelligence, was influenced by what he read. De Musset says that "A man must be as ignorant as a school-

master if he thinks he is capable of initiating a single thought which has not already been brought to life in other brains. Even to plant cabbages is to imitate someone." Dr. Charles G. D. Roberts, to mention one who first comes to mind, proves this assertion in his poem, "Epitaph for a Sailor Buried Ashore," which is evidently inspired by Horace, Book 1, Ode 28; and his "Grey Rocks and Greyer Sea," the patent result of Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break." Lampman, however, shows, so far as I am aware, but one instance of direct *imitative attraction*—and that is confined to the matter and not to the form. I refer to his poem, "Heat," which, I have little doubt, was inspired by Leconte de Lisle's "Midi."

Now, I have never heard that Lampman was familiar with the French language, but living as he did in a *mileau* as much French as English, surrounded by cultivated French *littérati*, having access to splendidly furnished French libraries—taking these things into consideration, it is rather absurd to believe for a moment that our poet did not possess at least a thorough reading knowledge of our sister Canadian tongue. This being the case, then, it is almost equally certain that he was fully conversant with the Parnassians of France, whose chief and greatest poet was Leconte de Lisle. The principal character of the Parnassian School—faultlessness of form—was exactly the quality which would attract Lampman, who, in that respect, was a very good Parnassian himself. The classical chastity of the work of the French poet must have appealed to Lampman's love of chiselled beauty, and this would have predisposed him to a sympathetic study of the Parnas-

sian's verse. It is not strange, notwithstanding this presumed appreciation of de Lisle, that but one of the latter's poems should have directly inspired Lampman with creative fire. "Midi" is, in its topographical features and, in fact, in its whole picture, a scene as much Canadian as French, while the impression of the intense heat emanating from the Frenchman's lines reminds one of Canada on a blistering July day. On reading "Midi," Lampman would immediately have called up before his mind's eye a somewhat similar vision which he, too, would feel the urge to immortalize in verse. There might also have been present in his mind an impulse of rebuttal, so to speak; for de Lisle's poem closes on a note of complete pessimism, of a deep longing for oblivion, or, to use the expression of the distinguished French critic, M. René Doumic, "*pour la plus complète aspiration au néant.*" Such feelings were utterly foreign to Lampman's serene soul, and he might very well have closed his own poem in a tone which was tantamount to a quiet rebuke.

But let me place before you certain comparative passages from the two poems I have been discussing. From these quotations I leave you to draw your own conclusions as to the soundness of my deductions. Let me insist, however, upon the fact that Lampman would naturally transmute the thought of the French poet into Canadian and Lampmanesque feelings. My thesis is not that our own poet translated or plagiarized de Lisle, but that the latter furnished the impelling cause.

Leconte de Lisle opens "Midi" with a powerful picture of intense heat and its effect upon the earth. Lampman, at greater length and with the addition of animate life so essential to him, does the same thing:

"Midi, roi des étés épandu sur la plaine,
Tombe en nappes d'argent des hauteurs du
 ceil bleu
Tout se tait. L'air flamboie et brûle sans
 haleine;
La terre est assoupie en sa robe de feu."

* * *

"From plains that reel to southward, dim,
The road runs by me wide and bare;
Up the steep hill it seems to swim
Beyond, and melt into the glare.

"Upward half-way, or it may be
Nearer the summit, slowly steals,
A hay-cart moving dustily
With idly clacking wheels.

"By his cart's side the waggoner
Is slouching slowly at his ease,
Half hidden in the windless blur
Of white dust puffing to his knees.

"This waggon on the height above,
From sky to sky, on either hand,
Is the sole thing that seems to move
In all the heat-held land."

* * *

In four Alexandrines de Lisle has—minus the elements of motion and the limiting road—produced upon us the same impression of great heat and silence which Lampman develops in four short line stanzas. The idea of extent of space expressed by the Canadian in the line "From sky to sky, on either hand," is found in the opening of the Frenchman's second stanza, "L'étendue est immense . . ."

The element of silence, tersely expressed by de Lisle in the words, "tout se tait," is elaborated by Lampman in his fifth verse:

"Beyond me in the fields the sun
Soaks in the grass and hath his will;
I count the marguerites one by one;
Even the buttercups are still."

The second first lines of this stanza, together with the next complete quatrain and the first two lines of the following verse, are fully reproduced in de Lisle's second stanza:

"L'étendue est immense, et les champs
 n'ont pas d'ombre,
Et la source est tarie où buvaient les
 troupeaux;
La lointaine forêt dont la lisière est sombre,
Dort là-bas, immobile, en un pesant repos."

"On the brook yonder in a breath
Disturbs the spider or the midge;
The water-bugs draw close beneath
The cool gloom of the bridge.

"Where the far elm-tree shadows flood
Dark patches in the burning grass,
The cows, each with her peaceful cud,
Lie waiting for the heat to pass."

Here again Lampman introduces the elements of life which de Lisle so utterly eliminates from his picture—except in one vital point. In his fifth stanza the Parnassian says:

"Non loin, quelques boeufs blancs, couchés
parmi les herbes,
Bavent avec lenteur sur leurs fanons épais,
Et suivent de leurs yeux languissants et
superbes
Le songe intérieur qu'ils n'achèvent
jamais."

The picture is the same, though its details are differently expressed and variously ordered. De Lisle's spring is dried up, Lampman's brook is motionless. The Frenchman's shadow is that of the distant wood, the Canadian's is that of the "far elm-tree." De Lisle's white oxen slaver, Lampman's cows chew the "peaceful cud." Again I say, the picture is essentially the same. Lampman goes on to add elements neglected by de Lisle, but which are natural and inevitable when one considers the different temperament of the two poets. But the inspiration is seen even to the end.

Note the two conclusions. De Lisle, in his utter disillusionment:

"Homme si, le coeur plein de joie ou
d'amertume,
Tu passais vers midi dans les champs
radieux,
Fuis! La nature est vide et le soleil,
consume;
Rien n'est vivant ici, rien n'est triste on
joyeux.

"Mais si, désabusé des larmes et du rire,
Altéré de l'oubli de ce monde agité,
Tu veux, ne sachant plus pardonner ou
maudire,
Goûter une supreme et morne volupté:

"Viens! Le soleil te parle en paroles
sublimes;
Dans sa flamme implacable absorbe-toi sans
fin;

Retourne à pas lents vers les cités infimes,
Le coeur trempé sept fois dans le néant
divin."

What answer does Lampman give to this cry of the pessimist?

"From somewhere on the slope nearby,
Into the pale depth of the noon
A wandering thrush slides leisurely
His thin revolving tune.

"In intervals of dreams I hear
The cricket from the droughty ground;
The grasshoppers spin into mine ear
A small innumerable sound.

"I lift some times mine eyes to gaze;
The burning sky-line blinds my sight;
The woods far-off are blue with haze;
The hills are drenched in light.

"And yet to me not this or that
Is always sharp or always sweet;
In the sloped shade of my hat
I lean at rest, and drain the heat;

"Nay more, I think some blessed power
Hath brought me idly wandering here,
In the full furnace of this hour
My thoughts grow keen and clear."

The closing stanzas of the Canadian's poem are almost a translation with commentary of the French verses:

"If you happen to pass through the fields about noon," says de Lisle. "I have been led hither by some secret influence," states Lampman. "Nature is empty and the sun devouring and pitiless," groans the Frenchman. "Though the sun's glare blinds me," replies the Canadian, "yet is his light a drenching beneficence to the hills and the distant hazy woods." "Absorb the sun into your inmost being," counsels the Parnassian. "I drain the heat," exults the singer of the *Lyrics of Earth*. "Here all is dead and without emotion," weeps the materialist. "Here the thrush sings, the cricket chirps, the grasshopper shrills," smiles the idealist Observer. "Go back with your soul steeped in sevenfold nothingness," mourns the pessimist. While out here in this hot noon all emotion is deprived of its cameo-like clearness of outline, counters the ser-

ene optimist, "My thoughts grow much more lucid and I feel myself much closer to the eternal heart of the universe."

Yes, it seems more than probable that Lampman's most frequently quoted poem is the direct inspiration-child of de Lisle's masterpiece.

"Heat," is the only one, perhaps,

of all our author's pieces whose impelling cause is plainly and unmistakably stamped upon its countenance. Its soul is, in my humble judgment, purer, brighter, more tender; its form less perfect, less brilliantly beautiful, but nevertheless, "Heat" is, I believe, the direct and legitimate offspring of "Midi."

The City Trees

By Muriel Kennedy

THE trees are Nature's poets. When the wind
Blows through their leaves, as though caressing them,
They sigh and make soft music to the earth,
And gently sing and whisper to each other.
They sway, and dream again of days long past,
When other generations passed them by,
And they were growing in the verdant fields
Where now the grimy city hems them in.

But when Night drops her mantle o'er the earth,
And smiles at Nature with her starry eyes,
A sudden stir goes through the rustling boughs,
And as the moon-ship sails across the sky,
And mounts up waves and banks of silvery clouds,
Each city tree is suddenly transformed
Into a fairy creature of the night,
Holding a close communion with the stars.

Even the ugliest trees are beautiful
When moonbeams paint them with a silver light,
And Darkness spreads a carpet at their feet,
Of deepest shadows and pale starlight made;
When gentle zephyrs sport among the boughs,
Bearing new tales of clover-laden fields,
And, over all, the mystery of night
Hangs like the subtle fragrance of a rose.

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